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ABSTRACT

The question of the evaluation of the impact of religious education is important for three reasons: (1) it is of fascinating theoretical interest to learn what are the effective means of transmitting fundamental values and what are the ineffective means; (2) it also seems appropriate to evaluate the contribution of religion to the improvement of the quality of urban life; and, (3) from the point of view of the churches, or indeed from the point of view of any human institution concerned with the transmission of fundamental values, there is excellent reason to ask whether one institutional transmission is more effective than another or whether one set of techniques promises greater payoff than another set of techniques. There are many obstacles to evaluation of religious education and especially urban religious education. Very few educators are eager to have their work evaluated before the evaluation takes place, and even fewer are likely to be pleased with it once it occurs. Those who propose to evaluate religious education will encounter certain special problems. For example, religious educators in some circumstances are sacred persons, and any criticism of religious education runs the risk of being taken as a criticism of the sacred. (Author/JM)

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RETHINKING URBAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: THE POSSIBILITY OF EVALUATION

by

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An Essay in a Volume in Honor of
Professor Robert Havighurst

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RETHINKING URBAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION:
THE POSSIBILITY OF EVALUATION

This paper presumes with Clifford Geertz[1] that religion is the quest for the real; it is that set of symbols which man uses to cope with the fundamental and primordial question of the meaning of life and the meaning of his life. Religion is a "cultural system"; that is to say, a "template," a road map which enables man to organize the variegated phenomena of his experience and interpret that experience in such a way that he can move through it with some degree of confidence. But religion is different from other meaning systems--common sense, science, esthetics, history, and ideology--in that it answers the most fundamental of questions. The religious answers do not only interpret reality, they guarantee the interpretability of reality. For if man cannot deal with the unexpected, the irrational, the tragic, the unjust, then the whole interpretability of the universe is called into question and man is forced to face the possibility of chaos.

In the Geertzian model the religious meaning system underpins and pervades, at least to some extent, the other meaning systems. Religion tells man what is the Really Real and thereby colors and shapes his response to more peripheral phenomena. Religion is man's world-view; it is the other side of the coin of his ethos,[2] for world-view or mythos tells man

[1] Clifford Geertz, Islam Observed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.

[2] Clifford Geertz,
Antioch Review

what is the nature of reality, and ethos or ethical system tells man how he must adjust to reality. The two sides of the coin define both reality and the good life. Even if man's world-view does not presume a transcendent, even if it is devoid of most manifestations of the sacred, it nonetheless is a meaning system which underpins and reinforces all of man's other meaning systems. The pertinent question in the Geertzian framework is not "Is their a God?" but rather "Who is your God?" that is to say, "What is your definition of the Real?". And the pertinent social science question is not whether man has a religion but what is the nature of his religion; that is to say, what are the symbols with which he copes with the ultimate and defines his ethics.

Thomas Luckmann[3] argues that man's religious "interpretive scheme" is acquired in the act of "individuation"; that is to say, when man discovers he is separate and exists over against others, he is forced to reflect on the meaning of his existence. The answers that he comes up with are of course shaped by his culture, his family background, and his own biographical experience. But religion is as primal to man as the fact of individuation, for once he perceives himself as individuated, man needs an explanation.

In the perspective of writers like Geertz and Luckmann, the permanence of religion ceases to be a matter for question. Neither author would argue that all men are equally religious or that all men need religion at every moment of their lives. Their position is much more

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[3]Thomas Luckmann, The Invisible Religion. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967.

modest: all men need at least occasionally some answers to basic questions, and most men need such answers with some degree of frequency in the course of their lives. While Durkheim's conclusion, "there will always be religion," was based on a somewhat different theoretical perspective, the same conclusion may be found in the writings of Geertz and Luckmann.

One might go even further to argue, as does the present writer in his Contemporary Religion[4], that from one viewpoint, man's religious needs are more explicit in the modern Western world. For in most cultures in which men have lived, the "interpretive scheme" or the "template" is inherited fmm one's ancestors, not only at the same time one acquires language but with the same finality. One may be more or less enthusiastic, more or less devout, more or less unquestionably committed to the fundamental responses of one's milieu, but there are not too many alternative options available. The religious question is for the most part implicit. However, in the contemporary world, as Luckmann points out, religious interpretive schemes compete in an open marketplace. Men and women become to some extent "consumers" who shop in the supermarket of interpretive schemes. While the range of choice is not infinite and while only a relative few people will settle for an interpretive scheme that is greatly different from than of their parents, nonetheless, the fact of the availability of options now makes the relitious issue explicit. If one can, at least within some limitation, choose one's own religion, then one cannot escape the burden of some sort of choice. Perhaps the reason for much of the restlessness among upper

[4] Forthcoming.

middle-class young people is that they are going through a difficult period of religious decision; that is to say, they are trying to formulate for themselves a"mythos" and ethos. They are much like the Indonesian and the Moroccan whom Geertz describes in the concluding pages of Islam Observed: engaged in a quest for the Real--much like Geertz himself, for that matter.

If religion is something so primordial and so pervasive in the human condition that one may very well wonder why there has been so little concern about religious education in American academic research, particularly since it is perfectly obvious that Americans are more likely to engage in religious behavior than are citizens of any other major industrial country in the world. One would have thought that sheer curiosity if nothing else would have driven American educational scholarship to attempt to discover how the religious traditions are passed down from one generation to another.

One might venture three explanations for the relative lack of interest in research in religious education: (1) Many if not most American social scientists who are interested in research on education are themselves not religious or at least are very much ill at ease and puzzled by their own religious heritage, to which they maintain some vestigial if puzzled loyalty. Under such circumstances, one can readily think of many other things to study besides religious education. (Professor Robert Havighurst, to whom this whole volume is dedicated, stands as an unique exception to this geralization, both among his own generation of scholars and also among the generation succeeding his.)

(2) American public education in the present stage of its development is irreligious; that is to say, it not only is not permitted to engage in explicitly religious education, it is also under severe constraints to behave in whatever way it can as though religion does not exist.[5] There is, one must admit, precious little in the words of the Constitution, the early history of the public schools, or even the political and educational history of the United States to justify such a posture towards religion in the public schools. On the contrary, the Supreme Court decisions of the last several decades have in fact been a legislative establishment of a combination of secularism and nativism as the official religion of American education, for which there is little justification anywhere in the American past. The "wall of separation" doctrine is a creation of contemporary secular jurists, and both the doctrine and its frequently absurd applications can hardly be justified in terms of the past.

However, it is true that whatever one can say of the past, given the present structure and temper of American society, there is probably no alternative to a situation in which both religion and religious education are declared off limits to American public schools. Therefore the assumption which has dominated educational research for many decades--and this is the critical point for research on religious

[5] I remember once in my days as a parish priest attending a Christmas presentation at the local public school. The piece de resistance was a play presented by the kindergarten children about Santa Claus and his elves. I could not help but wonder if this was really all the public school could say about what happens in the last two weeks of December in Amerian society.

education--is that education and public education are practically the same thing. "Mainline" educational research is concerned with public schools. But religious education cannot take place in public schools. Therefore "mainline" educational research is not to be concerned with religious education.

(3) Finally, the principal institution which engages in religious education in a classroom context is the Roman Catholic Church. Until rather recently the Roman Church has not been all that interested in having its education researched and evaluated by professional scholars; and, to tell the truth, professional scholars were not all that interested in researching and evaluating Roman Catholic schools, at least in part because they were inclined to doubt whether the existence of such schools was a particularly good idea. In other words, if one had been tempted to do research on religious education, the most obvious place to begin would be the Catholic schools, and that thought itself was usually a sufficient barrier to any further consideration of the possibilities of evaluating religious education.

However, if the perspective of the present paper, based as it is on the work of Luckmann and Geertz, is correct, then religious education is an extremely important topic for research. It may also be a topic of considerable importance for those who are concerned about the urban educational problems in American society. I will cite five reasons which might be advanced to support the notion that religious education is an important dimension of urban life.

1. We know, of course, that many of the leaders of the black movement in the past decade were ministers. We know that the black churches played in the past, and still play, an extremely important role in the lives of many people of the ghetto. What we do not know with any degree of precision is the role that religion plays either in motivating the poor to move beyond the ghetto or in persuading them to be content with their lot in the ghetto or in leading them toward social action directed toward the elimination of the ghetto. The cheap and easy answer to such questions is to say that the principal function of religion in the black community has been to make the black man resigned to his fate; but this flies in the face of both the phenomenon of the vigorous religiousness of the upwardly mobile black (as one scholar observed, "There is no one more Anglo-Saxon than an upwardly mobile middle-class black.") and the fact that much of the militant black leadership has been and continues to be clerical.

We know precious little beyond folklore about the different and perhaps conflicting functions that religion plays in the lives of the poor. The fact that we do not know more suggests that we have looked on the cultural life of the ghetto with blinders which have made it impossible for us to see the existence of religion.

2. It is obvious to anyone who has read the emergent literature on "middle Americans"[6] that they are deeply attached to their churches. It is still questionable in the mind of the present author

[6]Robert Coles', Middle Americans, for example.

whether middle Americans, and in particular the white ethnic component, are quite as insecure, threatened, and anxious as some of the publicists describing them would have us believe. Nor is it all that clear that they cling to their churches as pillars of stability and permanence in a time of confusion and change. Finally, the present writer remains to be persuaded that middle Americans are as opposed to religious change as some observers argue. (Middle American Catholics, for example, do not seem at all to be opposed to change in the birth control teaching.) There is little doubt that at times middle Americans are offended by the elitist rhetoric used by certain of their clergy, but at least it is plausible to argue that one can dislike certain of the cliches of the liberal elitist rhetoric and still not be opposed to social change.[7] In any event, the very fact that these questions can be raised shows that there is still much to be learned about the function of religion in the lives of those who occupy the middle ranks of the ladder in American cities; hence,much to be learned about how these people pass on their mythos and ethos to their children.

3. If one concedes the definition of religion with which we began this paper, there can be no doubt that there are accute religious problems in the affluent suburb. The whole literature of suburban angst which has appeared since the end of the Second World War ought to leave us in no doubt about how plagued the upper middle-class professional is

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[7]Andrew M. Greeley, "Political Attitudes Among American White Ethnics," paper presented at the meetings of The American Political Science Association, September 10, 1971.

about questions of meaning and belonging, even if they are not always asked explicitly. But even if we do not agree with the Cheever-Updike view of American suburbia, we are forced to concede that those offspring of suburbia who inhabit the counterculture are profoundly concerned about religious questions---frequently they are even bizarrely concerned. Whether, then, one is poor or struggling or affluent, one does not seem able to escape questions of meaning, and the answers to such questions are bound to affect the consideration of the problems and worries and opportunities of urban life.

4. A number of writers have argued that the American intellectual spirit has always been antagonistic towards the city, at least from the time of Nathanial Hawthorne. As one young woman remarked to me, "If Hawthorne were alive today, he would never have come any closer to Chicago than La Grange."[8] This intellectual distrust of the city may very well have become reincarnate in the rural communitarian movement which has led many young people to try to escape from the evil and corruption of the city to find once more the sources of life in intimate contact with the soil and the basic processes of life. However pleasant and at times demanding the rural communitarian vision may be, it has nothing to do with the humanization of the city. One could legitimately ask the various American religious traditions whether they are capable of generating a vision of urban

[8]My guess is he never would have made it past Barrington.

life: of harmony amid diversity, of serenity amid excitement, of cultural challenge amid economic productivity, and the generation of urban values around which social reform might be directed. If the religious traditions--secular or sacred--are not able to produce a vision of the Good Urban Life, then where are such visions to come from? At a minimum, the interested researcher would want to know what the various religious traditions think of the city, either implicitly or explicitly.

5. Finally, the recent concern about physical environment has about it a certain religious aura and at least implies certain ideas about the nature of the Real. If the so-called "ecological movement" is to be more than a passing fancy among limited elite groups, it will have to be anchored in the fundamental interpretive scheme of average Americans. The researcher concerned with urban problems would want to know whether concern with the physical environment is compatible with the basic religious traditions of American society and whether in fact it might represent a return to forgotten insights of these religious traditions; or, on the contrary, it is possible--as some have argued--that Christianity is of its very nature indifferent tothe physical environment (a position which is hard on St. Francis of Assisi). In either case, it should be obvious that man's fundamental meaning systems are bound to have a deep effect on the attitudes toward the physical environment.

If researchers are concerned about these aspects of urban religion and about how the religious traditions are passed on from generation to generation, they will have to investigate the three basic educational institutions; family, church,and school, and parcel out the differing contributions of each. They will also, of course, want to evaluate these contributions as well as to delineate them. The question of the evaluation of the impact of religious education is important, it seems to me, for three reasons: (1) It is of fascinating theoretical interest to learn what are the effective means of transmitting fundamental values and what are the ineffective means. Given the fact that the human race seems to have been rather successful at handing on fundamental world-views from generation to generation, we must assume that it has developed quite effective means of transmitting them, but we have only small amounts of information about how this transmission occurs among cultures other than the primitive.

(2) It also seems appropriate to evaluate the contribution of religion to the improvement of the quality of urban life. The problem is of course an extremely complicated one, as any reader of Merton's famous essay on manifest and latent function and dysfunction will understand. Even if one can establish fairly specific criteria about what constitutes the Good Urban Life, one will not find any simple answers even about the manifest functions and dysfunctions of religion, to say nothing about the latent ones. Nevertheless, the problem is fascinating, and one presumes that American social scientists

will not be frightened away from fascinating problems simply because they happen to be complex.

(3) From the point of view of the churches, or indeed from the point of view of any human insitution concerned with the transmission of fundamental values, there is excellent reason to ask whether one institutional transmission is more effective than another or whether one set of techniques promises greater payoff than another set of techniques. Is religious education more effectively carried on by the family or the church or the school? More precisely, under what set of circumstances do which combinations of these three institutions seem to promise the greatest payoff? And within the classroom, or for that matter the Sunday school class or the family discussion group, what kind of instructional methods are likely to be most effective?

There are many obstacles to evaluation of religious education and especially urban religious education. Very few educators are eager to have their work evaluated before the evaluation takes place, and even fewer are likely to be pleased with it once it occurs. Those who propose to evaluate religious education will encounter certain special problems. First of all, religious educators in some circumstances are sacred persons, and any criticism of religious education runs the risk of being taken as a criticism of the sacred. In a recent work I mentioned that some American bishops proclaim on the one hand that there is no thought of discontinuing Catholic education and on the other hand

close down any school that appears to be a financial liability. Even though the work in which this comment was made was favorable to Catholic schools, the bishop responsible for the educational office of the U. S. Catholic Conference fired off a secret letter to his colleagues in the American hierarchy denouncing me as an enemy of Catholic schools. When I obtained a copy of the letter and enquired as to the reason why I had been defined as an enemy of Catholic schools, it was explained that I had been critical of the leadership of the bishops. The point was an interesting one: he who is critical of the bishops is an enemy of Catholic schools; in other words, he who violates the majesty of a sacred person is supposed to be against the whole enterprise, no matter what else he may say. I am sure that the Roman Catholic Church has no monopoly on this sort of response.

Furthermore, one is dealing not merely with sacred persons but with sacred doctrines. There is an implicit assumption in many of those whose responsibility it is to preside over the protection of sacred doctrines that they have a certain inherent effectiveness. If one exposes young people to these doctrines for a certain period of time, it is taken for granted that they will affect their attitudes and behavior. While the term is not used of religious education, the attitude is not dissimilar from the old ex opere operato approach of Catholic sacramental doctrine. He who asserts that on the basis of evaluation research that a given method of religious instruction or a given institution of religious instruction is having no effect runs the risk of being accused not

merely of incompetant research (and of that he will surely be accused) but also having no respect for sacred doctrine. For if he respected sacred doctrine, he ought to know that it most certainly has an effect on the students that hear it.

There is, of course, an extremely serious methodological problem in trying to evaluate the effect of either Sunday schools or parochial schools on the attitudes and behavior of the students who have attended them. It is precisely those from the most religious families who are the most likely to participate in religious education. If one merely compares those who have had religious education with those who have not had such education, without holding constant the family religiousness, one has no way of knowing whether what one discovers is a family effect or a school effect.

Peter Rossi and I wrestled with this problem at great length in our Education of Catholic Americans[8]. We came up with a methodology which even with the retrospect of nearly a decade still seems serviceable. The basic finding to emerge from our research was that the greatest payoff of religious education comes when the child of a religious family goes to a religious school. In other words, neither the school by itself nor the devout family by itself produces the same effect that can be obtained when the two are working in concert. It was also interesting to note that in the absence of the devout family background the school

[8] Andrew M. Greeley, Peter L. Rossi, The Education of Catholic Americans. Chicago: Aldine Press, 1966.

had relatively little effect on the attitudes and behavior to be observed of the parochial school graduate in adult life.

But while the methodology that Rossi and I used was satisfactory for our study, given its goals and purposes, and our findings were interesting, given the constraints and limitations under which we were working, neither of us would presume to suggest that we had provided either a definitive methodology or definitive answers on the limited segment of the evaluation of religious education continuum that we dealt with. I do not know about Professor Rossi's reaction, but I for one am depressed that so little in the way of additional evaluation research has been attempted since the publication of The Education of Catholic Americans.

The evaluation of religious education, particularly urban religious education, then, is appropriate, interesting, feasible, difficult, and,at least in some sense, necessary. My own feeling is that this evaluation research will occur only in a context of close cooperation between university research scholars and church organizations. I am convinced that such evaluation research would be immensely profitable for both the churches and to the scholars and quite possibly also to the life of the city. (Though I am under no illusion as to how extensive one can expect the contribution of social research to be to the improvement of urban life.) Robert Havighurst, of course, was a man who pioneered this sort of research a long, long time ago. There have been only a few to follow in his footsteps, and while cooperation between the churches

and the universities in evaluating the impact of religious education would be desirable, only the most optimistic would describe such cooperation as likely in the immediate future. It will require many more men like Robert Havighurst before such cooperation is taken as a matter of course.